

Political Science 334: Seeking Truth in an Age of Misinformation, Cynicism, and Political Polarization

University of Washington
Autumn 2021

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Teaching Assistants:
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Overview of Class:

Many commentators have proclaimed that we are living in an era of “post-truth,” defined by Oxford Dictionaries as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” The forces leading to this phenomenon have been building in the U.S. and around the world over the last few decades. An academic movement often called “postmodernism” has asserted that there are no overarching truths, just local truths relative to each person or community. Meanwhile, the public has lost confidence in the people and institutions that used to serve as arbiters of truth, including experts, the media, governmental bodies, and organized religion. The information environment now includes both fake news and false allegations of fake news. The result is a profound challenge: How can anyone know what’s true? The answer for many people today is whatever feels true from within the filter bubble of their social media and personal networks.

This course will focus on the pursuit of truth in the contemporary world. Recognizing the need to examine competing perspectives on important topics, the syllabus includes authors writing from a range of political and ideological orientations (left, right, centrist, libertarian, etc.). We will learn the tools of critical and scientific thinking and then apply them to politics and other areas of controversy. We will gain insights into the political and cognitive biases that guide how people interpret information, form beliefs, and resist changing their minds. In a climate of political polarization, it has become more difficult to gain a shared understanding not just of the values in dispute but also the relevant facts. By understanding the errors in intuition, perception, and memory that can lead people astray and create a tribal mentality, students will strengthen their ability to recognize their own biases and evaluate claims through reason and evidence. Along the way, we will investigate why so many Americans embrace conspiracy

theories, reject ideas with a strong scientific consensus, and accept ideas lacking scientific support. We will also examine the production and consumption of false information and how a person can navigate the Wild West of claims and counterclaims easily accessible online.

Learning Objectives:

- To develop the traits of intellectual humility and intellectual honesty
- To gain a historical understanding of major approaches to knowing what's true
- To see how political identities and features of the human mind pose challenges to the search for truth
- To investigate institutions such as universities, science, the media, and courts as venues for truth-seeking

Course materials and privacy restrictions

The lectures will be recorded through Panopto and posted (along with the slides) at the course's Canvas site, for the benefit of students who cannot attend at the designated time or who want to return to the lectures at a later date. Releasing any part of the recording outside of our class is a violation of the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The sections will not be recorded, and so you must attend in person to gain the full benefit.

Covid-19 adjustments

The course will follow all UW policies with respect to Covid-19. These include masking requirements and prohibitions on eating and drinking within classrooms, except for hydration. The instructor and TAs will enforce the policies as appropriate. Non-compliant students may be reported to the Community Standards and Student Conduct Office. The policies also require any instructor or student who tests positive to quarantine for ten days, regardless of how they feel. For more information on the UW policies, see <https://www.washington.edu/coronavirus/>

Note that UW's policies include the following lines: "University personnel verified to be fully vaccinated may temporarily remove their face coverings when formally presenting to or instructing a class or group behind a podium or in a stage-like setting. A physical distance of at least 6 feet from others is required at all times when the face covering is removed." Accordingly, the instructor will be lecturing without a mask but will wear a mask before and after class, as well as during breaks.

Workload:

Students should expect a higher-than-average workload in keeping up with the weekly readings, videos, and podcasts, along with the required assignments.

Course requirements and grading breakdown:

The grading is based on weekly response memos, a paper, a midterm exam, and a final exam. The paper will require students to engage with materials from the course.

Weekly response memos: 18%

Midterm exam: 22%

Paper: 30%

Final exam: 30%

You will submit your papers through Turnitin, a program that organizes online submissions and assists in detecting plagiarism.

Religious Accommodations:

Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities. The UW's policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is available at Religious Accommodations Policy, <https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/>. Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course using the Religious Accommodations Request form, available at <https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/>.

Disability Accommodations:

Disability Resources for Students (DRS) offers resources and coordinates reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you have not yet established services through DRS, but have a temporary or permanent disability that requires accommodations (this includes but is not limited to mental health, attention-related, learning, vision, hearing, physical or health impacts), you are welcome to contact DRS at 206-543-8924, or uwdrs@uw.edu. See the DRS website at <http://depts.washington.edu/uwdrs/>

Academic Honesty:

Cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated under any circumstances. A suspected instance will be reported and disciplinary actions may ensue. For further detail about the University of Washington's academic honesty policy, please refer the Student Conduct Code at <https://www.washington.edu/cssc/for-students/student-code-of-conduct/>

Plagiarism and Turnitin:

The UW has a license agreement with Turnitin, an educational tool that helps prevent or identify plagiarism from Internet resources. Your instructor will use the service by requiring that assignments are submitted electronically through Canvas and checked by Turnitin. The Turnitin report indicates the amount of original text in your work and whether all material that you quoted, paraphrased, summarized, or used from another source is appropriately referenced.

Schedule of Topics and Readings

Note: Particular authors appear on the syllabus not because the instructor necessarily endorses them but because they are relevant to the course. Some of the readings, videos, and podcasts may change as the quarter moves forward. You will always receive notice of any changes at least one class session in advance.

Thursday, September 30 Introduction to the class

Read/listen/watch (required):

Arnold Kling, Signs That We Face an Epistemological Crisis: Book Titles, 2021

Stephen Colbert, The Word—Truthiness (just the first segment lasting 2:40, not the whole episode)

Kendra Cherry, The Benefits of Being Open-Minded
Kathryn Schulz, On Being Wrong
The Economist, Jonathan Rauch Defends “The Constitution of Knowledge”
Heterodox Academy, The HxA Way
Van Jones, Safe Spaces on College Campuses
Robert George and Cornel West, Truth Seeking, Democracy, and Freedom of Thought and Expression
Caroline Sutton, ‘We Know Who You Are’: Group Threatens Doctors, Others Wearing Masks Outside Williamson Co. School Board Meeting

Friday, October 1 Introduction to your Friday sections

Tuesday, October 5 Premodern approaches to truth

Read/listen/watch (required):

Augustine of Hippo, letter 93 to Vincentius, chapter 2, paragraphs 6 and 8; and chapter 6, paragraph 20

Martin Luther, Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants

Pope Pius IX, Syllabus of Errors. Focus on #s 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 14, 15, 18, 21, 55, 77, 78, and 80, and remember that these are propositions Pope Pius IX is *condemning*

Answers in Genesis, Can We Prove the Bible is True?

Catholic Answers, Papal Infallibility

Wikipedia entry on film version of Fiddler on the Roof

Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, lyrics and music to Tradition

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

Albert Mohler, Postmodernism and Society

Thomas Aquinas, The Sin of Blasphemy

Thursday, October 7 Modern approaches to truth

Read/listen/watch (required):

Skeptic Presents, What Is a Skeptic?

Scott Lilienfeld, Intellectual Humility: A Guiding Principle for the Skeptical Movement?

Steven Pinker, Reason Is Not Negotiable

New York Times, It Is Every American’s Right to Curse the President

Logan Chipkin, Dogma Is Not Confined to the Cathedral

Irshad Manji, Rethinking Life on the Left

Ravi Kudesia, Diversity Is Not Enough: Why Collective Intelligence Requires Both Diversity and Disagreement

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

Julia Galef, How to Think, interviewed by Coleman Hughes

George Orwell, Politics and the English Language

Friday, October 8 Premodern and modern approaches to truth

Response memo #1 due

Tuesday, October 12 Postmodern approaches to truth

Read/listen/watch (required):

Roland Barthes, The Death of the Author

Reza Aslan, interview on The Daily Show

Jesse Singal, Reza Aslan on What the New Atheists Get Wrong about Islam

Then & Now, Understanding Derrida, Deconstruction, and Of Grammatology

Ross Douthat, How Michel Foucault Lost the Left and Won the Right

Nick Gillespie, Libertarian Postmodernism

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

Lindsay Beyerstein, On Bullshit: Harry Frankfurt, Donald Trump, and Indifference to Truth

Michel Foucault, The Subject and Power

Thursday, October 14 Premodern, modern, and postmodern approaches to truth

Read/listen/watch (required):

Helen Pluckrose, The Evolution of Postmodern Thought

The Economist, Echoes of the Confessional State

Contrapoints (Natalie Wynn), on Jordan Peterson

Suzanna Danuta Walters, Why Can't We Hate Men?

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Aspects & Assumptions of Whiteness & White Culture in the United States

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

An Evening with Steven Pinker and Jonathan Rauch, on The Constitution of Knowledge

Ben Shapiro, Religious Belief and the Enlightenment, interviewed by Jordan Peterson

Friday, October 15 Comparing the approaches to truth

Response memo #2 due

Tuesday, October 19 Fallacies and biases that undermine reasoning

Read/listen/watch (required):

15 Logical Fallacies You Should Know before Getting into a Debate

Carol Tavris, Why We Believe—Long After We Shouldn't

David Robson, The Intelligence Trap, interviewed on The Middle Way Society

Michael Patrick Lynch, Teaching Humility in an Age of Arrogance

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

Carl Sagan, The Fine Art of Baloney Detection

Musa al-Gharbi, There's No Reason to be Smug about the Partisan Diploma Divide

Tom Chivers, So You Think You're Open-Minded

Thursday, October 21 Flaws in intuition

Read/listen/watch (required):

Laurie Santos, How Monkeys Mirror Human Irrationality

Sheena Iyengar, The Art of Choosing

Andrew Shtulman, Scienceblind, interviewed by Michael Shermer on Science Salon

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

Annie Duke, Thinking in Bets, interviewed by Julia Galef on Rationally Speaking
Informed Choice Radio Personal Finance Podcast, David Hand on The Improbability Principle

Friday, October 22 The search for rationality in forming beliefs and making decisions
Response memo #3 due

Tuesday, October 26 Flaws in perception and memory

Read/listen/watch (required):

Daniel Simons, Seeing the World As It Isn't
Steven Novella, Body Snatchers, Phantom Limbs, and Alien Hands
Elizabeth Loftus, How Reliable Is Your Memory
Julian Sanchez, Don't Do Your Own Research

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

Hidden Brain, The Double Standard, interview with psychologist Emily Pronin
Kelsey Piper, How to Reason about Covid, and Other Hard Things, interviewed by Julia Galef
on Rationally Speaking

Thursday, October 28 Midterm exam

Friday, October 29 Reflections on the course so far

Tuesday, November 2 Origins and effects of political polarization

Read/listen/watch (required):

Shadi Hamid, America Without God
Thomas Edsall, America, We Have a Problem: The Rise of 'Political Sectarianism' Is Putting
Us All in Danger
Yascha Mounk, The Perils of 180ism
Saturday Night Live, Black Jeopardy with Tom Hanks
David Horsey, Local Politics Has Gone National
Lilliana Mason, Uncivil Agreement, interviewed by Russ Roberts on EconTalk

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

Douglas Ahler, Something Democrats and Republicans Have in Common
Nat Brown, Reopening the American Mind
Hidden Brain, Not at the Dinner Table, interview with Yanna Krupnikov

Thursday, November 4 Tribalism and truth

Read/listen/watch (required):

Tom Jacobs, Why We Engage in Tribalism, Nationalism, and Scapegoating
David French, The Descent of the Partisan Mind
Jerry Taylor, The Alternative to Ideology
Ezra Klein, How Politics Makes Us Stupid

Hyrum Lewis, Our Big Fight Over Nothing: The Political Spectrum Does Not Exist

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

Andrew Sullivan, America Wasn't Built for Humans

Nicholas Phillips, What My Fellow Conservatives Can Learn from the Left Behind the Curve, documentary

Friday, November 5 Polarization and tribalism

Response memo #4 due

Tuesday, November 9 The limits of individual rationality

Read/listen/watch (required):

Rebecca Saxe, How We Read Each Other's Minds

Jonathan Haidt, The Rationalist Delusion in Moral Responsibility (only the first 17:55)

Robert Kurzban, Why Everyone (Else) Is a Hypocrite, talk at The Amazing Meeting 2014
Edge, The Argumentative Theory, A Conversation with Hugo Mercier

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

Timothy Wilson, Strangers to Ourselves, APS Award Address

Adrian Bardon, Humans Are Hardwired to Dismiss Facts That Don't Fit their Worldview

Thursday, November 11 (Veterans' Day)

Friday, November 12 Individual rationality

Response memo #5 due

Tuesday, November 16 Experts and expertise

Read/listen/watch (required):

Tom Nichols, The Death of Expertise, talk at Politics and Prose bookstore

Steven Novella, Scientific Consensus

Ross Douhat on the Trouble with Experts, interviewed by Yascha Mounk

Kerrington Powell and Vinay Prasad, The Noble Lies of Covid-19

Ryan Long, When an Expert Disagrees with the Experts

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

Brian Gallagher, Wikipedia and the Wisdom of Polarized Crowds

Suhan Kacholia, Expertise, Trust, and Partisanship

Thursday, November 18 Universities and truth

Read/listen/watch (required):

University of Chicago, Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression

American Association of University Professors, Statement on Professional Ethics

Musa al-Gharbi, On the Relationship between Ideological and Demographic Diversity

Musa al-Gharbi, Difference and Repetition in the Viewpoint Diversity Space

Heterodox Academy, Understanding the Campus Expression Climate

Lara Schwartz, False Equivalence, interviewed by Chris Martin on Half Hour of Heterodoxy

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):
Jacalyn Kelly, Tara Sadeghieh, and Khosrow Adeli, Peer Review in Scientific Publications
Bonnie Kristian, I Worked at a Website that Rated Professors for Political Bias

Friday, November 19 Experts, universities, and truth
Response memo #6 due

Monday, November 22 Paper due

Tuesday, November 23 Science and truth
Read/listen/watch (required):
Lee McIntyre, The Case for Science
Naomi Oreskes, Why Trust Science?
Stuart Ritchie, Science Fictions: How Fraud, Bias, Negligence, and Hype Undermine the Search for Truth, interviewed by Michael Shermer on Science Salon

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):
Ed Yong, A Waste of 1000 Research Papers
Arthur Lupia, What's the Value of Social Science?
Diego Reinero and Jan Van Vavel, Researchers' Politics Don't Undermine their Scientific Results

Thursday, November 25 (no class—Thanksgiving break)

Friday, November 26 (no class—Thanksgiving break)

Tuesday, November 30 Science denial on the left and right
Read/listen/watch (required):
Luana Maroja, Self-Censorship on Campus is Bad for Science
Oren Cass, No, Not that Evidence
Jerry Taylor, A Paid Climate Change Skeptic Switches Sides, interviewed by Indre Viskontas on Inquiring Minds
Marty Makary, Lose the Mask! Eat the Turkey! And Other Sane Advice for Thanksgiving

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):
Alice Dreger, Galileo's Middle Finger, interviewed by Gad Saad

Thursday, December 2 Does (or can) the news media uncover truth?
Read/listen/watch (required):
Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics (1926 version)
Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics (2014 version)
Associated Press, Statement of News Values and Principles
American Press Institute, The Lost Meaning of 'Objectivity'
Brent Cunningham, Re-thinking Objectivity
Wesley Lowery, A Reckoning over Objectivity, Led by Black Journalists

Louise Perry, An Untrue Claim in the New Yorker Speaks Volumes

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

Margaret Sullivan, The Disinformation System that Trump Unleashed Will Outlast Him

Bret Stephens, Media Groupthink and the Lab-Leak Theory

Friday, December 3 Science, the media, and truth

Response memo #7 due

Tuesday, December 7 Objectivity and subjectivity in the news media; moral truths

Read/listen/watch (required):

Danah Boyd, Did Media Literacy Backfire?

The Onion, CNN Holds Morning Meeting to Decide What Viewers Should Panic about for Rest of Day

Carolyn Hax, Everything Is on Fire

Kate Starbird, Disinformation Campaigns Are Murky Blends of Truth, Lies and Sincere Beliefs: Lessons from the Pandemic

The Economist, From Congo to the Capitol, Conspiracy Theories Are Surging

Nina Schick, Deepfakes and the Infocalypse, interviewed on Intelligence Squared

Read/listen/watch (extra/optional):

Ezra Klein, The Media Divide Beyond Left-Right

Thursday, December 9 Courts as venues for truth-seeking

Read/listen/watch (required):

Mark Alan Smith, The Rise of Do-It-Yourself Religion

Thomas Harper, On Pleasurable Beliefs

Friday, December 10 Course review

Thursday, December 16 Final exam from 4:30-6:20